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Human Rights Council
Twenty-fifth session
Agenda item 4
Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by the Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[18 February 2014]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

GE.14-11794
1411794

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Situation in the Syrian Arab Republic

According to UN estimates, at least 130,000 people have died in the Syrian Arab Republic during nearly three years of ongoing clashes between government opponents and Syrian forces.

Initially, peaceful demonstrations transformed into a national uprising and the pursuit of freedom has turned into a bloody civil war which is threatening more and more people – especially religious and ethnic minorities of Syria.

The Society for Threatened Peoples, as a human rights organization which advocates the rights of persecuted or threatened ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities, is particularly concerned about the fate of the non-Arabic and non-Sunni population of Syria. Ethnic and religious minorities make up at least 45 percent of the Syrian population. Under the government of the Assad family, who pursue a rigorous Arabization policy, minorities in Syria have long been exposed to oppression, physical attacks and expulsion. Thus, for the minorities, the beginnings of the protests were also accompanied by a hope for a more tolerant country.

Now however, the ethnic and religious minorities have reason to believe that their situation in a new Syria will hardly improve. At the moment, the Syrian minorities are confronted with a new threat, namely the totalitarian Islamist ideology which Jihadists from all over the world want to establish in Syria by force, and which partially falls on fertile ground within the Syrian opposition.

The majority of the 20 million Syrians are Arabic and adhere to Islam. However, the population is mostly of the Sunni faith. Druze, Ismaelites and Alawites – president Bashar al-Assad also belongs to the latter - are part of the Shia minority. The non-Muslim population consists primarily of Christians; the

Yazidi form the smallest religious minority in Syria with only a few thousand members.

The Kurds form the biggest ethnic minority. They have also become an independent party in the conflict, as many of them only have Kurdish interests in mind, and are striving for home rule in their areas of settlement, following the example set by the autonomous region of Kurdistan in Iraq. In late January 2014, the three Kurdish regions in Northern Syria declared themselves to be autonomous regions. This was mainly initiated by the PYD (Democratic Union Party): Jazeera, Kobani and Afrin, all three of them sharing a border with Turkey, proclaimed their new status without including the opposition or the government. The latter has not officially reacted yet while the former publicly disapprove of any autonomy. Islamistic opposition groups such as ISIL and other organizations associated with al-Qaida are waging an open war against the autonomous regions and are persecuting Kurds as well as Christians.

The remainder of the ethnic minorities also face an uncertain future. Many Christian Armenians and Assyro-Arameans, who are often considered as indigenous due to their long past in Syria, are threatened by flight and displacement. Furthermore, many Circassians are fleeing from the civil war and its effects. The Turkmen, many of whom live in the war zones in the northwest of the country, also experience clashes on a daily basis. Hence, all minorities in the country are already either directly affected by the war or threatened by its consequences. After the end of the civil war, which is becoming increasingly remote the longer the conflict wages, all minorities have to receive the same rights so that the country can find peace.

The government's fighters as well as opposition groups are receiving support from international agents. This support manifests itself not only in weapon supplies but also in the promotion of their interests and voices through e. g. the United States or Russia. Minorities such as the Kurds, Christians, Yezidi and others do not have any backup of this kind. Thus, their position in the conflict is easily ignored: due to pressure from Turkey the US did not allow the participation of a Kurdish delegation, representing about 20 percent of the population, at the Geneva II talks.

The violence of the government as well as that of the Islamist combat units of the opposition against the civil population has to be discontinued with immediate effect. For an interim solution, direct access to the besieged regions from both the government and opposition troops must be guaranteed. Especially in the regions of Yarmuk and Homs, besieged by

government troops, and in the Kurdish regions of Afrin, Kobani (Ain al-Arab), Nubl and al-Zahraa, besieged by opposition troops, the civilian's starvation is being used as a weapon which has to be stopped with immediate effect.

Society for Threatened Peoples is convinced that peace in Syria can only be successful if the interests of all parts of the Syrian population are retained. The minorities, especially the approximately four million Kurds and Christians, have to be considered when talking about the future of Syria.

Society for Threatened Peoples Society for Threatened Peoples therefore calls on the Human Rights Council to call for:

- All opposition groups have to guarantee the observance of human rights. Opposition groups, including the Kurdish PYD, have to ensure freedom of speech and demonstration as well as all other human rights for everyone in the areas controlled by them. They have to grant access to international and local commissions to examine the prisons which they operate.

- All plans by western governments for an intervention in Syria may only be considered if a complete plan for the solution of the existing conflict inside Syria is "on the table". Minorities and the whole of the civilian population must be protected not only from Assad's air force, but also from the marauding armed bands of any background. After military intervention, the population in Syria must not be left to their fate, as was the case in Somalia.

- Support for any opposition group or the Syrian government must presuppose a new constitution in which the linguistic, cultural and administrative rights of the Kurds as well as the Assyro-Arameans and other minorities are guaranteed. Christians, Yezidi, Alawis, and Druze must be able to enjoy complete freedom of worship.

- There must not be impunity in a future state of Syria. All people responsible for war crimes and violations of human rights are to be called to account.

- Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan has to be appealed to in order for him to open up the Turkish borders to the Kurdish regions of Jazeera, Kobani and Afrin, so that humanitarian aid can reach the distressed population. In these regions, where not only Kurds live but also refugees from the whole country find shelter, irrespective of their religious or ethnic background, people are lacking the most essential things, such as food or medication. Providing for these is not possible, especially since access to the regions from the South is blocked by the Syrian government and opposition fighters and from the North by Turkish troops.

- An international Syria conference must be convened as quickly as possible. At this conference, a peace process should be initiated in which all Syrians are involved, including all minorities as well as the opposition and the government. Furthermore, all foreign participants must contribute to a constructive solution to the conflict.

- Future international talks about a solution can only take part with representatives of ethnic and religious minorities present as equal participants.

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Human Rights Council
Twenty-fifth session
Agenda item 3
Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development

Written statement* submitted by the Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[18 February 2014]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

GE.14-11687
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Please recycle

A House in Visegrad, Bosnia and Herzegovina

On 21st January, 2014, the Serbian Municipality of Visegrad decided to send out police forces to prevent a public memorial service for the survivors of the genocide against Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks) that took place in the eastern Bosnian town near the Drina river during the Bosnian war (1992-1995). More than a hundred masked special unit policemen were sent to the Muslim cemetery Strážišt morning to remove the word "genocide" from a commemorative plaque at the memorial site.

Before, on December 24, 2013, the city administration had ordered the demolition of a house in which Serbian troops had burned alive 70 women, children and elderly men. An international campaign was able to prevent the demolition. This politically-motivated act appeared intended to eliminate the memory of past crimes and dissuade members of the exiled former majority Bosniak/Bosnian Muslim community from exercising the right to return to Visegrad enshrined in the 1995 Dayton settlement of which the European Union is one of the international guarantors.

A representative of the Office of the High Representative (OHR) who has visited the site commented that he could see with his own eyes that there weren't any problems with the house and said that that the order of the municipal authorities to demolish the house on Pioneer Street gave representatives of the international community cause for concern. He said that time should be allowed for a proper legal review including the right to appeal.

In 1991, the municipality of Visegrad had 21,199 inhabitants, 63.5 percent of them Bosniaks. Today, there are less than 12,000 inhabitants. About 1,500 of them are Bosniaks who returned after the war. The Muslim people in Visegrad are trying to ensure that every Muslim grave stele on the cemetery bears the word "genocide".

Visegrad occupies a historically strategic location on the road from the garrison town of Uzice in Serbia to the Bosnian Serb wartime headquarters at Pale and the BiH capital Sarajevo. Some of the most terrible incidents of the Bosnian War took place in the town as the majority Bosniak/Bosnian Muslim population was terrorised into leaving. These included the Pionirska Ulica (Pionirska Street) and Bikavac fires in which approximately 150 elderly men, women and children as young as two days old were burned alive, mass rapes, murders and disappearances at Vilina Vlas and other local rape camps and brutal executions on Visegrad's UNESCO World Heritage Site Mehmet Pasha Sokolovic bridge.

The remains of the house at Pionirska Street have served as a physical reminder of the crime, a memorial to the victims and a focus for the commemoration ceremonies that every year bring back survivors and relatives dispersed elsewhere in Bosnia who are deterred from a more permanent return by a persistent atmosphere of hostility.

Society for Threatened Peoples urges the Human Rights Council to urge the European Union to:

- Ensure that the remains of the house at Pionirska Street can continue to serve as a physical reminder of the crime, a memorial to the victims and a focus for the commemoration ceremonies that every year bring back survivors and relatives dispersed elsewhere in Bosnia who are deterred from a more permanent return by a persistent atmosphere of hostility.